

A Trip to Delhi

~ Rashid Jahan ~

My sweet sister, do let me come in, too,' said a voice from the verandah and, along with it, entered a girl wiping her hands with the edge of her kurta.

Mallika-begum was the first amongst

her friends to travel in a train, even though the journey was only from Faridabad to Delhi. The women from the mohalla had gathered around to listen to the accounts of her travel.

'Come if you want! As far as I am concerned, I am tired of repeating the same story ever so often. Only God knows how many times I have told it. I boarded a train here and reached Dilli. And there, one of his—I mean, my husband's—associates, a station master, met him. And then my dear husband left me along with the luggage and disappeared. And I, wrapped in a burqa, was left sitting atop the luggage. On the one hand this burqa troubled me and, on the other, the wanton men milling around! Men, as you know of course, are

dissolute to begin with and, if they see a single woman sitting alone like I was, they just keep hovering around. Just imagine, I didn't even have a chance to chew a paan. Some of these men coughed, others mumbled, some others passed comments. I almost died of dread! Only God knows how hungry I was. And bua, what do you know? Delhi station is much, much bigger than any fort that you can think of. One can keep looking far into the distance and all one sees is the station and only the station, stretched out endlessly. Train tracks, engines, goods trains all around! And what terrified me most were those blackened men who live in the engine.'

'Who are these people who live in the engine?' somebody interrupted.

'Those who live there? Well ... I really don't know, bua. These were men in blue uniforms—some bearded and some clean-shaven. They can hold on to moving engines with one hand and hang out of them. Just a mere glimpse of them sends tremors through the heart. And there are so many sahibs and memsahibs on the Delhi station! It is just impossible to count them. They hold hands and walk about, talking in some gibberish. Indians keep staring at them with unblinking eyes. The scoundrels deserve to be blinded! One of them started saying to me, "Come on, do let me sneak a quick look! Just a tiny peep at your face!" I immediately ...'

Somebody teased, 'So, did you not allow it?'

'May Allah be always with me, bua! Did I go there to show my face to these ruffians? My heart skipped a beat — and then, changing her countenance, she added, 'don't interrupt me if you wish to listen.'

Complete silence fell over the assembly. Such spicy narrations rarely happened in Faridabad and women travelled long distances to listen to Mallika's story.

'Yes bua, the hawkers there are very different from the ones we have here. Many of them wear clean khaki clothes. Some wear white but many others also wear dhotis that are grimy and unwashed. A lot of them carry baskets and others run around pushing closed carts with

paan, bidi, cigarettes, dahi-vadas, toys and sweets. A cart stopped next to me. The commotion that followed could have ruptured your eardrums!

'On the one hand, the coolies keep screaming and, on the other, the vendors go on with their non-stop chatter. It is enough to make one deaf! The passengers almost climb on top of each other, and amidst all this was I—poor woman—sitting atop the luggage. I must have been kicked and pushed around by thousands of people. I kept praying to God under my breath to save me, "Jal to jalal to, aai balaa ko taal tu!" Finally, after all the hitches, after all the prayers, the train started to move and then began the scuffles between the passengers and the coolies.

"I'll charge one rupee!"

"No, I'll give you two annas!"

'This must have gone on for at least an hour. It was only after all this was settled that the station was finally cleared out. Of course, it had still not been completely emptied. The hoodlums on the station were still around.

'After about two hours, I spotted him—my husband—twirling his moustaches. He asked me ever so casually, "Should I get some pooris or something else if you are

hungry? Will you eat? I have already eaten at a hotel."

'I said, "For God's sake, take me home. I've had enough of this outing, enough! I know now that I should refuse even a visit to heaven with you. Oh, what a great trip you've brought me on!"

'The train to Faridabad was ready to leave. He ushered me in and then sat down next me, sulking. "Your wish!" he said, "it is entirely your wish if you don't want to enjoy your trip to Delhi."